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Ukraine is losing the war

Implications for Europe

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Summary

- Since President Trump's re-election, Ukraine and its European allies have quietly scaled back their objectives in countering Russia's aggression. They are preparing to accept shifting borders in Donbas, while demands for accountability for Russia's war crimes and for Ukraine's right to join alliances have also diminished.
- For Ukraine, the main problem is that there is no peace in sight. The prolonged war means that Ukraine remains outside not only NATO but also the EU. Ad hoc coalitions cannot replace the benefits that formal alliances and institutions provide.
- The implications for Europe are manifold. Ukraine's fate illustrates how regional and global powers are abandoning established international rules also on the European continent. European states are particularly vulnerable to this erosion, as their security strategies rely heavily on agreements and cooperative frameworks.
- European security has become increasingly intertwined with Ukraine's security. Europe will suffer if Russia achieves its objectives or if Ukraine fails to recover from the war.
- If Europe is not prepared to accept the loss of Ukraine, the erosion of the rules-based order in Europe, and Russia's control over the membership of European organisations, it should do more to change course.

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Introduction

During the war, optimism has been a necessity for Ukraine. The Ukrainian state leadership has emphasised good news and positive scenarios to encourage the population to endure inhumane conditions and personal losses, and to maintain international engagement. Had Western governments heeded pessimistic doubts about Ukraine's ability to withstand Russia's attack, no weapons would have been delivered. Even after four years of full-scale war, optimism still serves important purposes: portraying the situation as a Ukrainian victory may, among other things, help pave the way for public acceptance of a peace agreement.

Excessive optimism, however, can lead to misguided policies. As argued in this Briefing Paper, Europe must confront the reality that the foreseeable outcomes of the war are detrimental to Ukraine's future – as reflected in the title, “Ukraine is losing the war” – with implications for Europe as a whole.

In four years, no obstacle to the continuation of Russia's war has emerged. Russia has not abandoned its objectives of bringing Ukraine back under its control and reshaping the European security order. The ongoing war furthers these aims: Ukraine is effectively prevented from developing as a free country and from integrating with the West. The negotiation process also serves Russia's interests: it has succeeded in challenging the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and is negotiating European security arrangements with the United States.

Ukraine and its European allies, in turn, have downscaled their objectives. In the first years of the war, Ukraine and its partners promoted the objective of “a just peace”. They demanded Russia's accountability for the war of aggression and war crimes, rejected territorial concessions, and advocated

Ukraine's NATO accession. After President Trump's re-election, however, the calls for a just peace ended.¹ The closing of the NATO door for now has been silently accepted by Ukraine and its European partners. President Zelenskyy and opinion polls in Ukraine have begun to signal openness to de facto territorial losses.²

The downscaling of objectives reflects the situation on and around the battlefield. Russia's economic, material, domestic, and foreign policy conditions allow it to continue the war, even if its advance is slow. Ukraine's defence capability, for its part, is not immediately threatened, but in the medium term it is weakened by, among other factors, uncertainty regarding necessary defence materiel, unresolved manpower issues, cumulative strain and internal pressures, and challenges in financing the war. There is no reason to assume that Ukraine's combat power will increase.

Even more importantly, the downscaling reflects the new US foreign policy line, under which Ukraine is expected to make concessions, the US will not provide additional weapons, and even the purchase of supplies can no longer be taken for granted.³ The shift in US foreign policy is also negatively

1 Some European leaders openly acknowledged that “a just peace” was no longer feasible. Jochecová, Ketrin (2025) “Finnish president warns that ‘a just peace’ in Ukraine is unlikely”. *Politico*, 3 December. <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-president-alexander-stubb-warning-just-peace-ukraine-unlikely/>.

2 See Nychyk, Alyna and Paul D'Anieri (2025) “Ukrainian public opinion and the path to peace with Russia”. *East European Politics*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2025.2538481>.

3 Ålander, Minna and Umland, Andreas (2026) “Three strategic dilemmas facing Europe in the ongoing us-Russia-Ukraine negotiations”. *SCEEUS Commentary*, 3. https://sceeus.se/publikationer/three-strategic-dilemmas-facing-europe-in-the-ongoing-us-russia-ukraine-negotiations/?trk=feed_main-feed-card_feed-article-content.

affecting Ukraine's position through its European partners. Their political room for manoeuvre has narrowed as the transatlantic crisis has deepened and resources are increasingly needed for national defence. Negotiations on security guarantees, among other issues, now take place in a context in which transatlantic unity is compromised.

“While the outcome of the war remains open, none of the currently anticipated scenarios offers a sustainable peace for Ukraine.”

This is not to say that Ukraine has achieved no victories. Compared to the pre-2022 situation, Ukraine's international position has become more established: concrete examples include the prospect of EU and NATO membership, bilateral security agreements, and deepening defence partnerships. However, as will be argued below, the prolonged war is undermining these gains. With the NATO door already closed, Ukraine is unlikely to be welcomed into the EU as long as the war continues.

While the outcome of the war remains open, none of the currently anticipated scenarios offers a sustainable peace for Ukraine. The US-led peace talks are expected, at best, to lead to a fragile peace – and even that outcome remains unlikely for now. Russia is not committed to the peace process and is unlikely to uphold an agreement without enforcement. The grim situation and its expected implications do not, of course, rule out the possibility of positive surprises or shifts. Unexpected developments may still emerge, as illustrated by the US-Israeli attack on Iran and the escalating war in the Middle East, whose effects on international support for both Ukraine and Russia remain uncertain.

This Briefing Paper examines the anticipated implications of the war as they currently appear and underlines that if these implications are unacceptable for Europe, a policy shift is needed.

Can Ukraine's peril be separated from Europe's future?

Before 2022, Europeans tended to treat Ukraine's security issues as separate from those of the rest of Europe. The illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas in 2014 were widely regarded in Europe as relatively isolated events. Since most European states did not perceive an immediate threat to their national security, they largely continued business as usual, expanding energy trade with Russia and not considering military support for Ukraine.⁴

In February 2022, a threshold was crossed. It became clear that a war of this scale would have continent-wide effects. The first spillover effects appeared at the EU's borders in the form of refugees – later including those being instrumentalised – and were followed by broken undersea cables as well as drones sighted at Danish airports and in Polish airspace. The war also generated economic shocks of varying scale across Europe, resulting from the need for alternative energy sources, rising defence expenditure, and the collapse of eastward trade.

The growing perception of interdependence prompted concrete action: Ukraine and Europe gradually built defence partnerships from scratch. The lack of prior defence cooperation, the taboo against sending weapons to conflict zones, as well as the fear of Russia's reactions limited military support for Ukraine, particularly in the first weeks of the war, but over time, successful cooperation built trust. EU support for the Ukrainian army is now estimated at around €69.7 billion, including advanced weapon systems, and has only increased since the shift in US foreign policy.⁵

In the process, Ukraine has come to be viewed not only as a recipient of European security assistance but also as a contributor to Europe's security. While Europe is funding the defence effort and providing most of the weapons, Ukraine, in turn, is fighting the aggressor state that most of Europe now considers a major military threat. Ukraine is also regarded as increasingly important for the EU's defence

4 E.g. Karjalainen, Tyne and Marco Siddi (2025) “From role change to policy change: EU member states and change in EU foreign policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine”. *Journal of European Integration*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2574424>.

5 European Council (2026) EU military support for Ukraine. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/military-support-ukraine/>.

industrial base and is therefore being included in its development programmes. European states have institutionalised their military cooperation with Ukraine through bilateral security agreements, and the EU has offered Ukraine a path to accession.⁶

While the deepening cooperation has addressed the challenges posed by interdependence, it has also created new forms of this mutual dependence. Ukraine has become dependent on European financial and military assistance, while Europeans, in turn, have become dependent on Ukraine's effective and responsible use of the weapons they provide. Should Ukraine fall, Europe's own weapons and investments could end up in the hands of a regime hostile to the entire continent.

Europe is also increasingly dependent on Ukraine's internal stability. Ukraine remains a fragile democracy, and the war has created fertile ground for long-standing problems – limited rule of law, stalled reforms, and the centralisation of power – to persist and grow. As the war delays Ukraine's EU accession and postpones elections at all levels, the risk of democratic backsliding has also increased. If Ukraine's democratic transition fails, Europe will need to manage its new defence partnership with an increasingly authoritarian ally.

Finally, domestic disappointment and a sense of injustice tend to deepen under wartime conditions, and Ukrainians' already low trust in political institutions limits the extent to which these pressures can be channelled through electoral processes alone. After the war, a failed recovery could trigger a spiral of internal unrest in Ukraine, with potential spillover effects across Europe. Europe's existing plans for supporting stability and democracy in Ukraine rely on the EU accession process, but a Plan B is needed, as demonstrated below.

The ins and outs of European security

At first, Russia's full-scale war reshaped the European security architecture by expanding its organisations: Finland and Sweden joined NATO, and the EU revived its enlargement process. The opening of EU and NATO accession perspectives for Ukraine in 2022 and 2023 strengthened the country's international standing and offered new incentives for reform and prospects for growth and stability. Now, however, the war is pushing Ukraine from the category of potential "ins" to that of "outs" in Europe's security organisations. This has implications beyond Ukraine.

NATO has long been regarded in Ukraine as the strongest possible security guarantee against Russian aggression. However, after Donald Trump's re-election as US president, the window of opportunity for Ukraine to join NATO effectively closed, as illustrated, for example, by the 28-point peace plan. This plan reflected the shared vision of President Trump and President Putin regarding European security arrangements, in which the right of peripheral states to join alliances is not respected.

By the end of 2025, Ukrainians' trust in the US and NATO had waned, and their hopes were increasingly pinned on Europe.⁷ EU membership is increasingly regarded in Ukraine as a form of security arrangement, based on the assumption that joining the Union would raise the threshold for further Russian military aggression. Ukraine is also seeking EU membership to anchor itself within the democratic community and to gain political and economic opportunities.

EU membership is, however, also slipping out of reach. The continuation of the war prevents Ukraine from fulfilling the membership criteria, including the implementation of reforms, which has significantly slowed down after the promising start of 2022. Additionally, the enlargement process is being halted by member states' blocking behaviour, with analysts suggesting that Hungary's

6 See Rabinovych, Maryna and Anne Pintsch (2025, eds.) *Ukraine's Thorny Path to the EU. From "Integration without Membership" to "Integration through War"*. Palgrave Macmillan. See also Karjalainen, Tyne and Tuomas Iso-Markku (2026) *The enlarging EU as a security actor: Capacity building in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans*. InvigoratEU Policy Report. 10.5281/zenodo.18374761.

7 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. *Opinions and views of Ukrainians on issues of war and peace, trust in Western partners, and the internal situation: December 2025*. <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1569&page=1>.

veto conceals wider opposition. The long-standing dispute over EU reform – with some member states opposing it and others demanding it before enlargement – remains unresolved.⁸

As international politics around European security organisations are gaining momentum, the possibility of an unexpected shift in the peace talks advancing Ukraine's EU membership cannot be ruled out. A short-cut would not, however, bring Ukraine the reforms and democratic development it attaches to the idea of membership. Ukraine's rapid accession would also reshape the EU itself, potentially requiring a reinterpretation of its existing security commitments, including those laid out in Article 42(7) of the TEU. Either the EU would need to evolve as a security organisation to strengthen the credibility of its "security guarantees", or earlier doubts about their relevance would grow. European states have communicated clear caveats regarding their willingness to defend Ukraine – caveats that, if Ukraine joined the EU, would then concern a member state. Much of this, however, would depend on the other security guarantees extended to Ukraine, including those offered by the US. What is evident is that the EU's evolution as a security actor is intertwined with the future of Ukraine and the great-power politics surrounding it.

During the full-scale war, the EU and NATO have been supplemented by new and evolving flexible arrangements, among them the European Political Community, initiated by France to respond to EU neighbours' aspirations for integration, and the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine. The latter is the key format in which security arrangements for Ukraine are being planned. These ad hoc formats fail, however, to provide long-term security solutions for Ukraine or others. Without long-term strategies, stable funding instruments, consolidated membership, or clear rules, such coalitions lack the advantages of established international organisations, such as joint defence planning, cost-sharing, resource pooling – and incentives for reform.

“The opening and closing of NATO and EU doors is part of broader turbulence within the European security architecture, with implications that extend beyond Ukraine.”

The opening and closing of NATO and EU doors is part of broader turbulence within the European security architecture, with implications that extend beyond Ukraine. Some earlier security organisations have already lost much of their relevance, as they have not been able to adapt to the war context, notably the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), of which Russia is a member. Both the EU and NATO are experiencing an identity crisis of sorts, partly linked to Russia's aggression. In responding to the full-scale war, the EU is navigating uncharted waters as an emerging defence actor by funding weapon deliveries, developing the European defence industrial base, and training Ukrainian troops. However, even with its military turn, the EU does not aim to compete with NATO in the field of defence and does not offer Ukraine or others the credibility of collective defence and deterrence.

Following the reorientation of US foreign policy, NATO in turn is grappling with historic internal conflicts, including the dispute over Greenland and fragmented policies towards Russia. NATO's new, turbulent era leaves allied countries with less room for manoeuvre: focused on safeguarding the Alliance's credibility, they are less willing to risk any of it to support those outside. Moreover, the hasty transfer of responsibility from the US to Europe has meant that European NATO allies are prioritising investment in national defence. The crisis is thus limiting both political and military support for Ukraine. Finally, the precedent that Putin's views on acceptable NATO members are taken into account raises the question of whether they might one day matter for existing members as well. The final sub-section below discusses what this reveals about the erosion of the rules-based order in Europe.

⁸ See Nagornyak, Ivan and Wesslau, Fredrik (2026) "Ukraine and the EU need a fresh start". *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/03/17/ukraine-eu-membership-war-economy-europe-candidate-russia/>. Karjalainen, Tyyne (2023) "EU enlargement in wartime Europe: three dimensions and scenarios". *Contemporary Social Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2023.2289661>.



Leaders attend a Coalition of the Willing meeting in Paris in September 2025. From left to right are Bart De Wever, Ursula von der Leyen, Donald Tusk, Alexander Stubb, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Emmanuel Macron and Dick Schoof.
Source: Dati Bendo / European Union, 2025

The Ukrainian precedent in Europe's rules-based order

The full-scale war has led to the abandonment of the idea that Russia and European states could build security collaboratively by agreeing on rules and norms of co-existence.⁹ Russia violates the UN Charter and commits war crimes in Ukraine, and European states do not trust its agreements.¹⁰ Since Trump's re-election, analysts have gradually come to the conclusion that the US no longer shares

Europe's vision of international rules – a conclusion reinforced by recent military interventions and the Trump administration's scepticism towards international institutions, as reflected in its security and defence strategies.

US pressure on Ukraine to accept concessions is another example of power dynamics being prioritised over international legal principles – even within Europe. Since the US policy shift, Ukraine has faced pressure to compromise on rights grounded in the rules-based order, including the inviolability of state borders, accountability for Russia's violations of international humanitarian law, and the sovereign right to choose military alliances. In the context of the peace talks, European counterparts have signalled a degree of flexibility regarding these rules and a weakening of demands for Russian accountability. This is illustrated by

9 Saari, Sinikukka and Tyyne Karjalainen (2025) "The boom and crash of cooperative security in Europe: Four scenarios for the future". *FIIA Briefing Paper*, March 2025, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs. <https://fii.fi/en/publication/the-boom-and-crash-of-cooperative-security-in-europe>. Pillars here refer to the building blocks or central elements of an order and should be distinguished from poles and polarity.

10 See e.g. Bieńczyk-Missala, Agnieszka (2024) "Russia's war crimes in Ukraine as a tool of war". In Grzebyk, Patrycja and Uczkiewicz, Dominika (eds.) *The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict and War Crimes*. Routledge, 115–128.

their counterproposal to the 28point plan,¹¹ which did not reject the violations of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, did not call for accountability for war crimes, but limited the size of Ukraine’s army and hence its future ability to defend itself.

Moreover, since Trump’s re-election, Russia has reappeared at the table where security arrangements in Europe are being negotiated. In fact, it has often been the only actor invited, prompting alarm that Europe’s voice would be absent from negotiations directly affecting it.¹² Russia’s return to a position in which it is invited to shape the rules in Europe appears, for now, to be confined to the context of the war in Ukraine. This means that Russia can use its bilateral diplomatic channel with the US on European affairs only for as long as the war in Ukraine continues.

Europe has been no mere bystander in the erosion of the rules-based order around Ukraine. Yet much more could have been done – particularly by providing Ukraine with the military support it needs to resist Russia’s illegal war, by using economic means more effectively to enforce accountability, and by defending the European vision of applying international rules to Ukraine within the framework of transatlantic diplomacy. Moreover, the fact that Europe did not rush to assist Ukraine when Russia first began violating the rules-based order in Ukraine in 2014, but only mobilised once its own security was at risk, reveals an inconsistency in Europe’s commitment to that very rules-based order.

While Russia’s ability to reshape rules in Europe might be limited to the Ukraine war context, the US’s ability to dismantle the rules-based order by ignoring it in Ukraine or elsewhere is much more extensive, with global implications.¹³ The erosion

of international law both within and beyond Europe affects European security through several mechanisms. Among other things, it undermines the security strategies of all actors committed to the UN Charter and may encourage other states to reconsider their own commitments to treaties governing warfare, arms control, and nuclear materials.

The effects of the eroding rules-based order will not be felt equally around the globe. European states are particularly dependent on rules, as their security has largely rested on agreements, treaties and cooperation. The European Union’s strategy and toolkit in particular have been developed on the assumption of a rules-based order – if that order is lost, the old tools will not function. Moreover, the rules that have benefited Western liberal democracies are being dismantled at the very moment when a broader global power shift towards China and the so-called Global South is eroding Europe’s ability to shape or rebuild the rules in the future.¹⁴

Conclusions

Four years into Russia’s full-scale war, Europe needs to consider whether it can live with the war’s unfolding scenarios and their now-visible implications. This means recognising, first, that the war and its effects are undermining Ukraine’s development as a sovereign state and hindering its integration into Europe. Without more pressure on Russia, there is no peace in sight. As a result, Europe should be prepared for a slowdown in reforms, potential democratic backsliding, and the rise of anti-Western sentiment in Ukraine.

Second, it should be acknowledged that Russia’s aggression, combined with the changing US response to it, is reshaping the European security architecture. The roles and boundaries of both the EU and NATO are evolving as a consequence. Decisions about who is in and who is out are now being made through power-political diplomacy or direct military means.

11 Reuters (23.11.2025) “Full text of European counter-proposal to us Ukraine peace plan”. <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/full-text-european-counter-proposal-us-ukraine-peace-plan-2025-11-23/>.

12 See Moshes, Arkady (2026) “Europe’s ‘own’ dialogue with Russia: Not as harmless as its proponents imagine”. *FIIA Comment*. <https://fii.fi/en/publication/europes-own-dialogue-with-russia>.

13 Whether this strategy proves to be merely another swing in us foreign policy – which has historically oscillated between multilateralism and unilateralism – is one of the fundamental questions shaping the European security landscape in the future. See Sinkkonen, Ville (2025) “The United States and Lost Visions of International Order in a World of Great-Power Competition”. In Sinkkonen, Ville, Veera Laine, and Matti Puranen (eds.) *Competing Visions for International Order Challenges for a Shared Direction in an Age of Global Contestation*. Routledge.

14 E.g. Haukkala, Hiski (2020) “Nonpolar Europe? Examining the causes and drivers behind the decline of ordering agents in Europe”. *International Politics* 58: 381–399. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00257-1>.

Third, it is necessary to recognise the precedent for the erosion of the rules-based order in Europe. Russia-US diplomacy on Ukraine signals the beginning of an era in which neither Russia nor the US is committed to the rules-based order on the European continent. Europe's silent acceptance of the erosion of rules – not only globally but also within Europe – raises the question of whether European states, which are particularly dependent on the rules-based order, fully understand the implications.

If Europe is not prepared to accept the loss of Ukraine, the erosion of the rules-based order in Europe, and Russia's control over the membership of European organisations, it should do more to change course. Russia is able to continue waging an asymmetric war against Ukraine because only a small fraction of Europe's and its allies' economic and military weight has been mobilised in response. A shift in course requires stronger isolation of Russia, greater support for Ukraine, and the removal of blockages in EU decision-making. This also requires Europe to defend its own interests in relation to its

allies when necessary, by defending the rules-based order in the case of Ukraine and upholding European security institutions grounded in Europe's vision.

Finally, some of the developments in and around Ukraine are beyond European control. There is only so much that weapons deliveries and economic sanctions can achieve. Ukraine's internal development lies in Ukrainian hands: by fixing what is broken in the accession process, the EU can support – but not direct – Ukraine's development. Where European influence on future scenarios ends, attention must shift to managing the implications – in other words, preparing to cope with outcomes that cannot be prevented. If Russia's aggression continues in one form or another, and if Ukraine's EU accession fails for any reason, how can Ukraine's democratic transition and stability be supported? If the US increasingly tolerates Russia's security ambitions in Europe, what new tools does Europe need to cope with the erosion of the rules-based order on the continent? ◆

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